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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [KPAL](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: HAMAS VICTORY PUTS SARG IN A STRANGE CORNER

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: The senior PLO representative in Damascus, Khalid Fahoum, said on January 30 that Damascus-based Hamas leader Khalid Mish'al was confident of Hamas' ability to govern and would quickly move to shore up support for Hamas in the PLO, in the PA security services and in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria. Hamas' victory was a double-edged sword for the SARG, Fahoum asserted. On one hand, Damascus was pleased with its ally's victory; on the other hand, the Syrian regime would eventually have to confront Hamas' long-standing ties with the regime's nemesis, the Muslim Brotherhood, he said. Fahoum, who said he was related to Mish'al (and to Saeb Erekat -- their three grandfathers were brothers), stated that he had called the Hamas leader on January 28 to offer three pieces of advice: be wise, be inclusive and be neutral in dealings with other Arab countries. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On January 30, the senior PLO representative in Damascus, Khalid Fahoum, discussed the impact of the overwhelming Hamas victory in the Palestinian legislative elections. Fahoum, who spoke by phone with Mish'al on January 28, said that while Mish'al was caught off-guard by Hamas' win, the Hamas leader was also confident about the ability of Hamas officials to govern. (Note: Syria's Al-Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi also suggested Mish'al was caught off-guard by election results, noting it had taken the Hamas leader two days to formulate public statements about the Hamas victory.) Fahoum predicted that Hamas would head ministries such as Social Affairs, Health, and Agriculture, while leaving the leadership of the Foreign and Defense ministries to independents or representatives of small parties so as to avoid dealing with Israel.

¶3. (C) Fahoum asserted that Hamas will move immediately to strengthen its ties with the PLO by supporting its members financially with "zakat" donations from Muslims in places like Malaysia, Pakistan and Indonesia. (Fahoum noted that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas recently increased PLO salaries by 50 percent.) Hamas will also aim to assert some degree of control over Palestinian security forces and to strengthen its position in Palestinian refugee camps, particularly in Syria and Lebanon, Fahoum said. The PLO representative did not respond when asked how Hamas would build support within Syrian Palestinian refugee camps, given past reports of a SARG ban on political organizing in the camps.

¶4. (C) Hamas' victory puts the SARG in a strange position, Fahoum said. On one hand, Damascus is pleased that its ally won the election, while on the other hand, the SARG will

eventually have to grapple with Hamas' close ties with the Syrian regime's nemesis, the Muslim Brothers.

15. (U) Publicly, the SARG has welcomed the Hamas victory. Syrian President Bashar al-Asad met on January 29 with an eight-member Hamas delegation, headed by Mish'al and including his deputy Abu Marzouk. Articles and photos of the meeting led local and regional papers. Asad congratulated the Hamas officials on the party's win and called upon the Arab, regional and international community to respect the will of the Palestinian people, according to media reports. On January 28, Mish'al also held a highly publicized 90-minute press conference in Damascus. In his 25-minute opening statement, Mish'al said that Hamas had three goals: reform, protection of the "resistance" and putting the Palestinian house in order. He promised to hold consultations with PA President Abbas (Abu Mazen) and all other factions on formation of a national partnership, adding that Hamas would also consult with the Arab world and international community. In the subsequent question-and-answer session, Mish'al said that resistance was a legitimate right for people under occupation. Responding to a question about the Hamas stance on the Oslo Accord and the Road Map, Mish'al said Hamas would respect agreements that served the interest of the Palestinian people. Asked whether Hamas would renew the conditional truce negotiated in Cairo, Mish'al said the accord expired at the end of 2005 and that Israel had not respected it. (Note: He did not say explicitly that Hamas would not renew the agreement.) Asked about Hamas' ties with Syria, Mish'al predicted that Hamas' relations with Damascus would be enhanced. The Associated Press also reported a Mish'al statement that Hamas would release the head of the popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Ahmed Saadat, and any other "young men of any faction" being held in a Jericho prison. Separately, the AP reported a statement by Mish'al's deputy Marzouk that his group did not recognize Israel "as we believe that it's a state that has usurped our land and expelled our people. These issues should be handled before we talk about recognition."

16. (C) Despite Mish'al's comments about the Cairo agreement, it is conceivable that Mish'al could assume the chairmanship of the Palestinian committee at the talks, and, like President Abbas, might even condemn Palestinian Islamic Jihad attacks on Israel, Fahoum said. Hamas itself would probably refrain attacking Israel, Fahoum said. Mish'al and members of his organization were unlikely to "return" to Gaza for fear of an Israeli attempt on their lives, Fahoum said.

17. (C) Fahoum, who said he is a distant relative of Mish'al's (and of Saeb Erekat's -- their three grandfathers were brothers), stated that he counseled Mish'al during their telephone conversation to be wise in formulating Hamas policies, to be moderate, and to be neutral in dealing with Arab countries. Fahoum asserted that Mish'al demonstrated wisdom in the January 28 press conference when he said that the role of PA President had not ended and called for cooperation between Hamas, Fatah and the Palestinian Authority. Abbas would likely remain as President and was expected to come to Syria "in a week or two" as part of the regime's effort to remain balanced, said Fahoum, noting he had recently spoken to Abbas by telephone. Fahoum characterized Mish'al as a wise, moderate person, "unlike others in Hamas" such as Abu Marzouk.

18. (C) Comment: Fahoum strikes us as a bit optimistic both about Hamas' abilities to govern and about the SARG. In the coming months, Damascus is likely to find itself in a delicate dance, as it attempts to show support for its long-time Hamas ally while it maintains its own rigid secular anti-Muslim Brother policy internally.

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